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The Social Justice Stream

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; Luke 3:1-20

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The Social Justice Stream within the larger church, throughout history, focuses upon justice and shalom in all human relationships and social structures. The Sunday School Movement that began in the early 18th century, the Abolition Movement that began in the late 18th century, the Suffrage Movement that began in the early 19th century, the Salvation Army that began in the 19th century, and the American Civil Rights Movement that began in the 20th century, are all examples of church-based initiatives that changed human history for the better.

While the Contemplative and Holiness traditions focus inward primarily, cultivating a prayer-filled and virtuous life, the social justice tradition compels us to look beyond ourselves to a world that aches for redemption and release. Many of us tend to live such sheltered lives that we fail to see the reality of human existence in the world at large.

According to one fascinating study, if the entire world's population were reduced to a village of 100 people, this is what life in that village would be like:

- **57 inhabitants would be Asian, 21 European from the Western Hemisphere, and 8 would be African**
- **70 would be people of color and 30 would be Caucasian**
- **There wold be 70 non-Christians and 30 Christians**
- **Half of all the wealth would be in the hands of 6 people, and all six would live in the United States**
- **70 of us would be illiterate**
- **50 of the 100 would suffer from severe malnutrition**
- **80 would live in sub-standard housing**
- **Only one person would have a college or university degree**
- **And no one would have a computer (the percentage of people who have a computer is so low that it doesn't even equal a half of one percent of the world's population)**

I find these figures staggering. If true, and I have no particular reason to doubt them, the statistics point out the urgency of bringing the witness of the Gospel to the world around us. John the Baptist is a good biblical example of this tradition - he preached the need to repent, not only of the need to come back into relationship with God, but also the need to repent of injustice and oppression. I think we especially need to hear such words during the season of Advent, when we give expression to our hope for the return of Jesus. After all, when Jesus comes back he will bring his kingdom to earth completely. Whatever sin has made crooked, Jesus' justice will make permanently straight once more.

Another person from the Bible that amply illustrates this Social Justice stream is the prophet Amos, who declared in no uncertain terms that sacrifices, ceremonies, propitiations, and other externalities of religion were insufficient for a life with God. He insisted that social righteousness - that is, justice in the social realm - was absolutely central to a life that is pleasing to God.

Amos wasn't educated. He was a country worker, a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees, yet he exercised his prophetic ministry in the most sophisticated of cities: Samaria and Bethel and Gilgal. From a human point of view, nothing qualified him for this most unusual prophetic ministry. But of course his work didn't depend upon human credentials or human resources. The *debar Yahweh*, the word of the Lord, had come, and he had no option but to proclaim the message given to him. Amos had a figurative trumpet that sounded only one note - justice, justice, justice. He was scandalized by the blatant injustices that had become so commonplace that no one seemed to notice. Listen to what he has to say [read Amos 2:6-8].

Selling the poor into slavery - perverting the justice of the oppressed - engaging in illicit sexual intercourse - taking financial advantage of the helpless. These acts of injustice all exhibit a common denominator = the abuse of power. Look again at the Amos passage:

- ***They sell the needy for a pair of sandals* - creditors selling the weak and vulnerable into slavery even when the debt owed was as trivial as a pair of sandals.**
- ***They trample the head of the poor into the dust* - the powerbrokers of the day using brutal, callous oppression over those who were without power and influence**
- ***Father and son go in to the same girl* - fathers taking advantage of the cultural inability of women to stand up for their rights, and forcing their daughters-in-law into sexual intercourse**
- ***They lay themselves down on garments taken in pledge* - the wealthy exploiting the destitute by refusing to return a coat that was given in pledge, even though the coat was desperately needed for warmth against the cold night**
- ***They drink wine bought with fines* - kangaroo courts assessing exorbitant fines and then carousing with the money instead of using it for restitution**

There is more. Amos takes the merchants and business leaders of the day to task for theft, graft, and for changing the weights on the scales used in transactions. It is important for *us* to know how much God cares about injustice in the business arena. At this stage in its history, Israel was in a golden age. Political security and economic prosperity abounded, and the people believed that all this abundance was a sign of God's favor.

But Amos came up with a different perspective - all their wealth and affluence were the result of the sacrilegious oppression of the poor. The people were impatient with religious holidays when commerce had to be suspended, revealing the true nature of their heart. And when they could legitimately engage in the business of commerce, they used crooked weights and measurements. The ephah - a dry measure slightly larger than a half-bushel - was reduced by lining the basket. The shekel - a metal weight of about eleven grams - was enlarged so that it took more gold or silver to balance it on the scales. Beyond all this, the balance itself was bent out of kilter in favor of the seller, so that the poor buyers, impoverished to begin with, ended up paying more to get less. And finally, to add insult to injury, the wheat they sold in shrunken quantities and at inflated prices had 'filler' in it, the 'sweepings' from the threshing floor.

But there is still more. A lot more. The elite corrupted the legal system. Those given the task of being judges acted together to deprive the common person from gaining a fair hearing. Bribery was common.

And the religious leaders corrupted the offerings and the music of corporate worship. The festivals, sacrifices and music were each evaluated by Amos and each soundly condemned. Why? Why would these acts of devotion be so utterly spurned? Was it because of ritual impurity? Was it because of compromise with the Canaanite religious practices? Was it because of a lack of zeal? No, no and no. One reason, and one reason alone, accounted for God's forthright rejection of their religious devotion - all of the festivals, all of the sacrifices, all of the instruments and music of worship failed because they were not accompanied by acts of justice and righteousness. And so the word of the Lord thunders forth:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream

For Israelites, this was graphic imagery. Living in the desert, they knew well the characteristics of the wadi, the streambed. Much of the year the wadi is bone-dry and of no benefit to anyone, but when the rains come, the first rushing wall of water flows with such force that anyone caught in the wadi will surely be swept away and drowned. And so Amos calls for justice (*mishpat)* to roll down like the raging torrent in a freshly fed wadi. Yet unlike that water in the wadi, which often dwindles to nothing, this righteousness is to be an everflowing stream, flowing day after day, year in and year out, under good circumstances and bad.

God, you see, demands something more revolutionary than festivals and sacrifices and worship songs. And that 'something more' is social righteousness - impartiality in judicial decisions, equity in business dealings, justice for the poor and the oppressed. *Because social righteousness is a divine mandate, liturgical life can never be divorced from it.*

This is the message of Amos. It is not a popular message today. It wasn't a popular message then. Now, it needs to be said that these were judgments against Israel, and we cannot universalize them. But we can say that these dreadful judgments show God's deep passion for justice in society, for it was truly God who gave the words, who spoke through his prophet, the man named Amos. All of us in the church would do well not to presume upon divine patience.

Social justice is where the central issue in the Holiness Tradition - love - meets the road. The fulcrum of the Social Justice Stream is Matthew 22: *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it - 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."* Love of God is the vertical movement and love of neighbor is the horizontal. White hot love of God compels us into compassionate love of neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? This is the self-justifying question asked of Jesus by a lawyer. The common view of that day was that 'neighbor' meant the person who looks like me, dresses like me, thinks like me. I think it's still the common view. Jesus explodes that common view by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Neighbor, says Jesus, is the person near us, the person who is 'nigh'; the person in need.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pushes the horizontal movement of love of neighbor to the n^{th} degree. He says our enemy is our neighbor. But even to want to love our enemies demands a power outside of us, which is precisely why the vertical

movement of love is so essential to the horizontal movement of love. Love of God makes love of neighbor possible.

The Social Justice Stream embraces three great themes summed up in three Hebrew words: *Mishpat*, *Hesed*, and *Shalom*. *Mishpat* means righteousness - a morality over and above, but including, strict legal justice. It has to do with ethical compassion. God's *mishpat*, according to Isaiah 58, is that people 'share your bread with the hungry … and bring the homeless poor into your house.' Copying social service programs and running them from a church is only a step in the direction of *mishpat*.

***Hesed* holds before us the great theme of compassion, of loving kindness, of steadfast love. God's wonderful *hesed* is from everlasting to everlasting, declared the Psalmist. This durable mercy is to be reflected in us as well. God desires in us steadfast love - *hesed* - and not sacrifice, not simple joining, not just showing up. Hesed is a quality that extends even to animals and the land - our dominion over the earth is to be filled with compassion. This too is social justice.**

***Shalom*, a word I use frequently in the final benediction of the morning, is a great beacon, a full-bodied concept that gathers in but is much broader than peace. *Shalom* means wholeness, unity, balance. *Shalom* embodies the vision of a harmonious, all-inclusive community of loving persons, and the great vision of *shalom* begins and ends our Bible - God brings order out of chaos and lays out principles for harmony at the beginning, and re-forms people from all nations into a loving community in the 'holy city, the new Jerusalem,' at the end.**

This Social Justice Stream calls us to a right ordering of society - right relationships and right living. It envisions the social order as it was meant to be. This Stream helps make our faith real, not merely theoretical. It puts names and faces on the work of justice. It also provides us a bridge between personal ethics and social ethics --and we need this help. When, for example, we faithfully read our Bible and at the same time develop racist public policy, we are a scandal to the Gospel. This must not be. God cares about us, as individuals, and about whether we lie or speak the truth, but he cares equally about companies that run advertising campaigns claiming more than is actually the case. It's not enough for us to care for individual cases of hunger or homelessness if we are part of multinational corporations, as employees or stockholders, whose policies continually impoverish other countries and peoples.

In this way, the Social Justice Stream gives relevance and bite to the language of Christian love. Too often our talk about love is sentimental and soft. It needs to be toughened by the hard realities of absentee landlords and prostitute rings and drug smugglers and industrial spies and local political lies.

Finally, the Social Justice Stream continuously holds before us the relevance of the impossible ideal. It points us to the new heaven and the new earth, and reminds us that 'God can make a way where there is no way.' It keeps alive the prophetic imagination, and it never lets us forget the redemptive power of the active, self-sacrificial love that is imaged on the cross.

***Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur*. Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him.**

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